

# Report

## Voyageurs National Park

### ■ 1.0 Site Description

Voyageurs National Park is located on the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin along the route used by the hardy French-Canadian canoemen who transported trade goods and furs between Montreal and the inland Canadian Northwest for more than 200 years. The park consists of 218,000 acres, 38 percent of which are water. It is five hours drive from Minneapolis and three hours from Duluth. There are no entrance fees or permits required for use of the park.

The park is located 15 miles east of the city of International Falls, Minnesota, and is served by the four unincorporated “gateway communities” of Rainy Lake, Lake Kabetogama, Ash River and Crane Lake. In those locations, there are resorts with overnight accommodations and boat rentals.

Voyageurs is a water-based park (see Figure 1). Access to the Kabetogama Peninsula, the islands and nearly all of the park’s shoreline is only accomplished by watercraft.

**Figure 1. Voyageurs National Park**



Although interpretative programs are presented at the Visitor Centers, a boat is necessary to experience firsthand most of the park's attractions. Thus, visitors either bring their own powerboat, sea kayak or canoe or they rent such craft from local businesses. Alternatively, one may rent houseboats, which are a very popular way to enjoy this park, from a local vendor.

Overnight accommodations include camping, houseboats, or the historic Kettle Falls Inn located on an island deep within the park, or lodging at a resort on the mainland. Most mainland resorts are located in the four gateway communities and have direct access to the water.

Visitation totals approximately 250,000 people per year, mostly between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Recreational activities include powerboating, fishing, canoeing, kayaking, nature observation, hiking, picnicking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing.

The historic Kettle Falls Hotel is located at the tip of the Kabetogama Peninsula in the park's interior.

## ■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) in this water-oriented park consist primarily of renting a boat or hiring a water taxi. Water taxi rentals are not always easy to obtain, however. Free public boat ramps and parking are available at the park's Visitor Center and the Kabetogama State Forest Campgrounds.

There are no land transit services among the four gateway communities or between the park and International Falls other than private taxi service, based in International Falls.

### *Water or Air Charter Services*

Several concessionaires in the four gateway communities offer water taxi and boat charter or air charter services as listed in Table 1.

**Table 1     ATS Services Available near Voyageurs National Park**

|                             | <b>Rainy Lake</b> | <b>Kabetogama Lake</b> | <b>Ash River</b> | <b>Crane Lake</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Water taxi and boat charter | 5                 | 9                      | 1                | 2                 | <b>17</b>    |
| Air charter                 | 0                 | 0                      | 0                | 1                 | <b>1</b>     |

Source: Voyageur's National Park, 1999.

## Houseboat Rentals

Houseboat rentals are a popular method of experiencing Voyageurs National Park (see Table 2). Currently, four private houseboat companies offer tour packages. The Park currently maintains 78 developed houseboat sites that can accommodate two houseboats each, 32 in the Rainy District and 46 in the Namakan District. Although houseboats are encouraged to moor overnight at developed sites, they may also moor along undeveloped shorelines or set anchor in the water under most conditions. The local houseboat industry has witnessed modest but steady growth.

**Table 2. Houseboat Rental Capacity**

|  | Int'l Falls,<br>Rainy Lake | Kabetogama<br>Lake | Ash<br>River | Crane<br>Lake | Total       |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|
| Houseboat companies/<br>number of houseboats                       | 2/42                       | 0/0                | 1/20         | 1/30          | <b>4/92</b> |
| Pillow count (maximum number of<br>persons accommodated per night) | 410                        | 0                  | 166          | 300           | <b>876</b>  |

Source: Voyageur's National Park, 1999.

The majority of houseboat visitors also participate in motorboating, fishing, and enjoying beach environments. Most (58 percent) of those renting houseboats were first-time visitors to Voyageurs. As noted in one study, "it is likely that the houseboat experience is thought of as a 'once in a lifetime' trip due to the uniqueness of the experience and the relatively high cost." However, many visitors become repeat visitors.

## Tour Boat Concessions

For many visitors, especially those without access to water transportation, the only way to experience the park is to take a naturalist-guided concessionaire tour boat trip. Currently, the park has two contracts to provide tour boat service on a regular basis during the main visitor season (mid-June to September 1). Generally, the tours afford visitors an opportunity for viewing the scenic environment of the park, observing wildlife, and visiting a historic or cultural site. Of the two commercial tour boats, the *Sight-Sea-Er Kabetogama* provides space for 19 passengers, while the *Pride of Rainy Lake* vessel can carry up to 49 passengers. The tour costs range in price depending on the length of the tour. Tour options are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Number of Tour Boat Operators by Location and Length of Tour**

| Location                 | Length of Tour Available |         |           |           |         | Total |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------|-------|
|                          | 8 Hours                  | 6 Hours | 3.5 Hours | 2.5 Hours | 2 Hours |       |
| Kabetogama-Namakan Basin | 0                        | 4       | 0         | 0         | 3       | 7     |
| Rainy Lake Basin         | 1                        | 0       | 0         | 5         | 5       | 11    |

Tour boat concessionaires face economic difficulties for a number of reasons including:

- The high cost of operating a tour boat (fuel, fees, licenses, insurance, maintenance, and staff);
- The high capital outlay for a suitable tour boat;
- A short tourist season of less than 80 days, starting with the fishing opener and ending October 1, with the bulk of the activity between June 18 and Labor Day; and
- The lack of large tour groups into the Park such as bus tours due to the isolation of the Park from other major attractions.

Nevertheless, at least one concessionaire has recently expanded service.

### ■ 3.0 ATS Needs

Two additional transportation systems have been identified. The first would provide access to Kettle Falls and its interpretative programs for those without access to water transportation. Presently, there is no regular private or Park shuttle service to Kettle Falls, and water taxi service is expensive. The congested docking at the Kettle Falls landing also limits access to the concession. A park concessionaire could provide this service.

The second need is for a shuttle system between boat trailer parking outside of the Park and the boat launch. However, expanding the existing trailer parking areas is difficult because of constraints posed by wetlands, other natural resources, and cost. This need exists at all four public entry points.

Park managers also suggest that any legislation consider the special needs of water-based parks, which pose unique and more expensive transportation problems.

## ■ 4.0 Basis for ATS Needs

Public water shuttle service to Kettle Falls, a major attraction in the Park's interior, is needed because the only way to get to Kettle Falls is by boat and presently there is no private or Park shuttle service available.

Additional boat trailer parking outside the Park is needed because of congestion at the present parking areas and environmental limits on their expansion.

## ■ 5.0 Bibliography

BRW, Inc. *Affected Social and Economic Environments*. Voyageurs National Park General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, Draft. 1999.

Voyageurs National Park. Internet site: <http://www.nsp.gov/vnp>. Information printed November 1999.

Voyageurs National Park. Rendezvous. Annual information publication, 1999.

## ■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Barbara J. West, November 17, 1999